

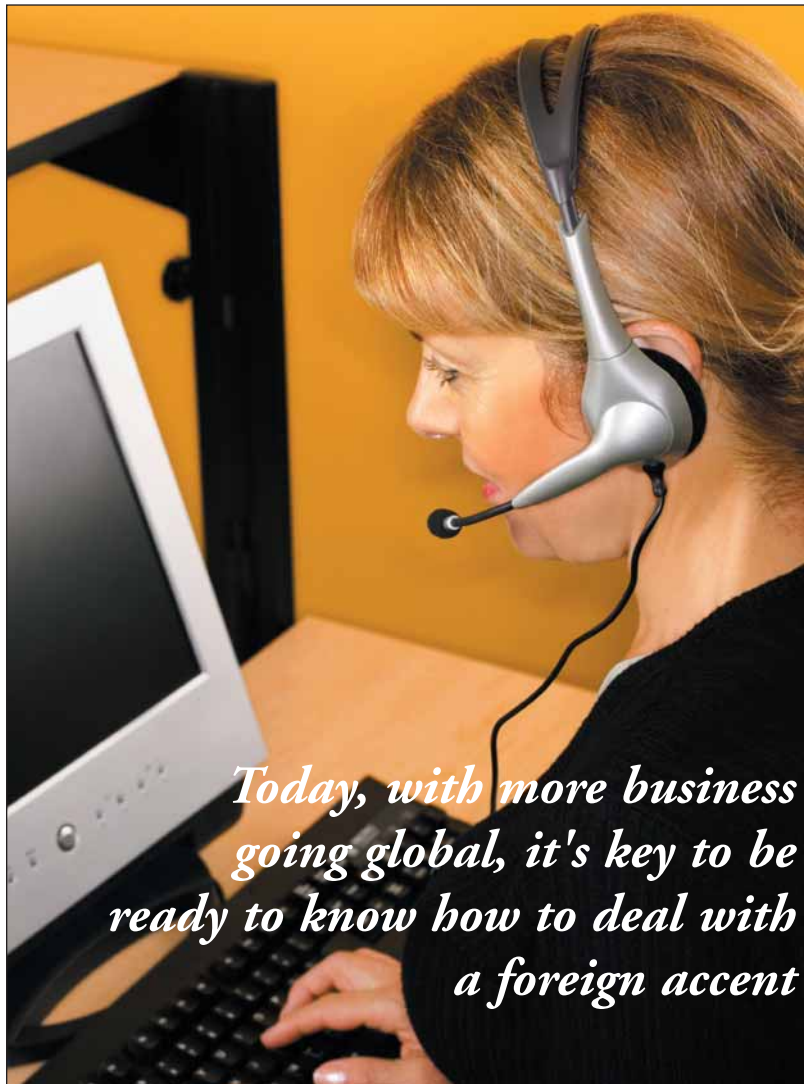
How to Handle a Foreign Accent

By Nancy Friedman

It's more and more common to talk with people whose native language isn't our own. These accents can be both international and domestic. How many times have you talked with someone just from a different region of the USA and not understood him or her? Miscommunication is easy with anyone who's not talking as you're used to hearing. Today, with more and more business going global, it's key to be ready to know how to deal with a foreign accent. Don't forget, to those from other countries, you are the one with the foreign accent. So these tips will go both ways, and they're effective both on the phone and in person.

Taken from our popular video, *How to Handle the Foreign Accent*, here are five key points to know to help you at your job (and in your personal life, too) when working with someone who is difficult to understand—accent or not.

- **Don't Pretend to Understand.** It's okay to gently explain you are having a little difficulty understanding them. Let's face it, if you have an accent, you know it. So it's not a surprise. One of the least effective things you could do when not understanding someone is to



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pretend that you do. Some folks nod or say, "okay" just to move the conversation along. That's not doing anyone any good. It's perfectly okay to simply and gently say, "I apologize. I am having a little difficulty understanding you. If you could slow down, just a little bit, I'll be able to get it all correct for you." That's the most important thing to the person with the accent—knowing you want to help and get it right. They're aware you might be having difficulty. And if you nod yes or pretend you understand, it won't help the situation at all. Your tone of voice is international, universal. So keep it at a light, slower pace. And yes, smiling is also universal. Other

people hear your smile in any language, even on the phone.

- **The phrase mentioned above is most effective and it is a key statement to learn.** I know for a fact that it is accepted very warmly. I've had many a person from another country come up and thank me for sharing that technique with the audience. It apologizes, acknowledges, empathizes, and creates credibility. It shows you want to help.
- **Don't Rush.** Rushing threatens callers. Often there's a tendency to want to really rush someone who speaks

with an accent. That's not a good idea at all. Rushing threatens the best of us, let alone those who are not able to express themselves in your own style. Slow down. Not to excess, of course, but if you find yourself constantly saying "uh -huh," over and over in rapid succession, you're probably rushing the customer.

- Don't Shout. People who speak with accents are not hard of hearing. I usually get a little laugh when I mention this point. Many a time we subconsciously speak louder or repeat the same word over and over, thinking that will help. It doesn't. People with accents normally hear very well. It's insulting to shout at them. Keep that smile on your face; it'll show that you have the patience to help. And keep trying to let them know you are there to help. It might take time, but it will help.
- Don't Be Rude. No one really thinks they're rude. But if you've ever said, "Hey, I can't understand you," or even a short, terse, "Huh?," then you're considered rude. Again, go back and explain that you're having a little difficulty understanding. They'll often repeat what they said for you. If the situation is hopeless and you simply aren't getting anywhere, don't be embarrassed or afraid to call for help. Perhaps another person can better understand what the customer is say-

ing. But remember, being shuffled from one person to another is frustrating to anyone, accent or not.

- Do Keep a Job Aid Available. Most often, 80 percent of the calls a business receives are from a certain area with the same accent—be it all Hispanic, Asian, or European. If your job has you working with a large percentage of people with one accent, keep a few simple phrases in that language near you. Short phrases will let the customer know you're trying. If you're in an Hispanic environment, for example, phrases like, "Un momento, por favor" (One moment, please) will help. Even if you mispronounce it, they'll understand. Hopefully, there is someone in your area who is either fluent or well spoken in a particular language who can help you formulate an effective work aid.

And remember, your smile is universal. Use it early and often, no matter who you're talking to. ■

Nancy Friedman, the Telephone Doctor®, is an internationally recognized expert on managing customer relationships. She delivers her customer service message to conferences and conventions and to corporate employees via her best-selling customer service video training series. She can be contacted at 314-291-1012 or Nancy@telephonedoctor.com.



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Millennial Technologies & Consulting International

44 Windsor Bridge Drive • The Woodlands, TX 77384 • 337.580.0788
parrie@jparrie.com